Introduction – “I’ll See You in 25 Years”: The Return of Twin Peaks and Television Aesthetics

sensesofcinema.com/2016/twin-peaks/return-of-twin-peaks/

the editors 7/10/2016

The return of *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991) after more than a twenty-five year absence from television screens is a major television event, and one that is capable of provoking reflection on the medium itself. This much anticipated return – occurring almost as predicted by Laura Palmer, who cryptically told Agent Cooper she would see him again in 25 years in the original series – gave rise to the conference of this name that took place at the University of Salford in May 2015, as an academic response to this return, an event from which the articles in this dossier derive. When it originally aired on the ABC network, *Twin Peaks* was experienced as a significant event, and not only because it was unusual at that time in the US context for an art filmmaker like David Lynch to become what is now referred to as a showrunner, responsible for the development of the narrative world of a TV series. Of course, *Twin Peaks* was not solely the displacement of Lynch’s cinematic work to television, and was in fact the result of his collaboration with Mark Frost. Nevertheless, as Lindsay Hallam points out in this dossier, *Twin Peaks* definitely bore the marks of Lynch’s signature style and was perceived by critics and audiences as “Lynchian”, despite the fact that Lynch only directed a limited number of episodes, and the show involved the participation of multiple writers and directors, in accordance with current industry practices.

But *Twin Peaks* was not only an event in terms of television authorship. Crossing several television genres such as the police, crime and mystery genres, melodrama, and comedy, the show also stood out in the televisual landscape as something of a meteor, a heightened televisual and cultural experience that it was important to participate in, whether via simply watching the programmes themselves, or also consuming its several paratexts such as *The Secret Diary of Laura Palmer*. This in itself was an innovation; certainly earlier programmes had encouraged viewer participation via cliff-hanger narrative enigmas such as “who shot J. R.” on *Dallas* (1978-1991), which was also reprised on *Twin Peaks* in terms of both “who killed Laura Palmer?” and “who shot Agent Cooper?”, the questions that began each of the series’ seasons. However, *Twin Peaks* took this further by layering multiple enigmas and delaying their solutions, at once intriguing and frustrating audience expectations, or perhaps first intriguing and then frustrating these expectations as the show’s popularity waned in the second season. As

Justus Nieland puts it, more than simply being an innovative television series, *Twin Peaks*, was “a cross marketing sensation, […] a post-secular multimedia myth.” Nevertheless, this approach also gave rise to one of the most active fan cultures to exist around a TV series at that time, which in many ways anticipated the contemporary era of Internet fandom. In fact it was one of the first fan cultures to make use of this then emergent technology, as Henry Jenkins discusses in his contribution to David Lavery’s *Full of Secrets* edited collection. If, then, *Twin Peaks* changed television, as contemporary authors such as Andreas Halskov argue, it is as much in terms of its innovative marketing strategies and resulting fan cultures, as it is its importation of supposedly “cinematic” aesthetics and techniques into contemporary television production.

In order to grasp the aesthetic significance of the return of *Twin Peaks,* it is necessary to situate it as coming early in the emergence of what Jason Mittell has called “complex TV”. *Twin Peaks* was not the first example of the kind of complex long-form narration that now characterises “quality TV” in the so-called third golden age of television, but it was certainly pioneering of several of the aspects Mittell identified as constituting complex TV: “Early attempts at this long-form arc storytelling […] did not catch on with audiences or foster imitators until the breakthrough of *Twin Peaks* in the early 1990s. This cult hit, whose influence was far more long-lasting than the series itself, triggered a wave of programs embracing its creative narrative strategies” . *Twin Peaks,* along with other innovative network programmes, had to negotiate the constraints of network programming, which is why amid falling ratings it was not able to last beyond two seasons. However, in the contemporary television landscape, such pressures are relatively relaxed, and following the successes of cable television shows such as *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007) and *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007-2015) to name only two of the most successful original series, there is a distinct industrial environment where not only cable networks but also content distributors like Amazon and Netflix have become producers of original programming with greater or lesser degrees of autonomy from the pressures of advertising and ratings. This is the televisual environment in which season three of *Twin Peaks* will take place, as a Showtime series in 2017, one in which narrative complexity, ambiguity and anti-heroic characters have become frequent if not commonplace. After some temporary doubts over Lynch’s involvement he has now been confirmed as the director of an expanded season of 18 episodes, all of which he and Mark Frost will write. In this sense, season three will be much more of an “auteur” production than its preceding seasons, but in a context in which such procedures have become almost normative.



Cooper and Truman staking out the Roadhouse in the Pilot: “What Goes Around, Comes Around”

Whether *Twin Peaks,* including as much of its ageing original cast as were able to participate, will seem dated or innovative in this new context remains to be seen, and can currently only be the subject of speculation, given the high levels of secrecy surrounding its production. Instead, this dossier offers a re-examination of the earlier seasons of the show, but in the light of its re-emergence into this transformed televisual environment. While each of the five articles are markedly different, they share an interest in televisual aesthetics, an interest that is also apparent in contemporary work in television studies, of which the clearest example is the recent collection *Television Aesthetics and Style*

In fact, a contemporary aesthetic turn in both original television production and television studies can be clearly discerned, even if this was an uncommon approach as little as ten years ago. Nevertheless, it was the rarity of such aesthetic tendencies in 1980s and 1990s television which made the show stand out in the first place, and which also gave rise to interesting critical responses. This is evident both in work directly on the show, as in *Full of Secrets*, as well as in work on Lynch by authors such as Martha Nochimson and Michel Chion, who discussed *Twin Peaks,* often critically, as an episode in David Lynch’s otherwise cinematic career.[See Martha P. Nochimson, *The Passion of David Lynch: Wild at Heart in Hollywood,* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), pp. 72-98; and Michel Chion, *David Lynch,* 2nd ed. (Berkeley: Univeristy of California Press, 2007)].

From today's perspective, however, it is possible to see the show in a different light, less as misplaced cinema, and more in terms of television aesthetics; rather than the lack detected by critics of the show such as Nochimson and Jonathan Rosenbaum in relation to Lynch's cinema, *Twin Peaks* can now be viewed as a key exemplar of television aesthetics that, however much it borrowed from cinematic techniques in terms of both visual *mise en scène* and sound design, and however much it relayed some of Lynch's signature style as a cinematic auteur, did so precisely and deliberately as an early example of complex television. In terms of narrative complexity, audiovisual style and audience engagement, this was an innovative mode of television, and yet it was still made within the parameters and constraints of 1990s US network television; constraints that make its aesthetic achievements all the more remarkable. It is precisely these aesthetic accomplishments that the articles within this dossier seek to address, through approaches to neglected or under-examined aspects of *Twin Peaks* television aesthetics.

The first article, "Tensions in the World of Moon" by Geoff Bil, focuses on a key and often neglected area of representation within the show, namely that of Native Americans. This article points to the fact that while the show was almost universally praised for its stylistic innovations, it can nevertheless be read as supporting some conservative agendas, not least in its presentation of the myth of the American frontier, complete with "good and bad Indians". Bil zeroes in on these representations in *Twin Peaks* not only via the character of BOB as displaced bad Indian and Hawk as good Indian, but also the misrepresentation of Native American spirituality within the series; in fact, as he points out, the cosmology of the show has much more dubious theosophical origins, and the show did little to engage with the beliefs or contemporary experience of the Snoqualmie people on whose land the show really and fictively takes place. Bil's analysis leads him to be fairly pessimistic as to whether the new iteration of the show can do "without the kind of narratological comforts provided by formulaic burlesques on – in this case – territorially and culturally dispossessed Native Americans", despite holding out some hope that it will respond to recent forms of local activism against development to which some groups of *Twin Peaks* fans have given their support.

The next two articles take a less representational approach focusing respectively on sonic media technologies and dance within the series, analysing how these phenomena both subvert the narrative world of *Twin Peaks* and are essential to how it functions. In Michael Goddard's article, a media archaeological approach is adopted giving centre stage to a range of devices including telephones, microphones, voice recorders and phonographs. Far more than background props, these devices are highlighted within the series as facilitating passages between worlds, and given quasi-magical properties precisely through breaking down. The numerous malfunctioning microphones, for example, are often the prelude to pronouncements form the otherworldly giant, while ghostly

phonographs accompany the acts of murder first of Laura and of her cousin Maddy. Taken together, the proliferation of these sonic technologies indicate that this is a world of haunted recordings, a media network in which such devices have as much agency as the human characters.

Alanna Thain's article, "One Way Out Between Two Worlds" instead follows the dance moves of *Twin Peaks* identifying their prevalence throughout Lynch's work. For Thain, dance disrupts – or, to use her term, "deranges" – the cause and effect linkages and sense of narrative development, in favour of the direct sensations of bodies in movement. As with the sonic technologies in the previous article, outbursts of dance in *Twin Peaks* point toward the instability of media texts in general and of the world of *Twin Peaks* in particular, and operate as a form of time shifting that she calls "heterochronicity". For Thain this goes beyond the digressive problematics of musical numbers in Hollywood cinema, as these outbursts of dance are fundamental to the very construction of the narrative world of the series, operating as what she calls, after Serge Daney and Gilles Deleuze, a "pedagogy of perception".

Agnes Malkinson looks at *Twin Peaks* from a different yet equally decentred perspective to the previous articles; that of the planned series of Georgia Coffee commercials, shot in Japan shortly after the series itself. More than merely paratexts, these commercials constitute for Malkinson a clear example of transmedia story-telling, which is supported by the ways they have been embraced by fans of the show as part of the *Twin Peaks* story world. Through a close analysis of the story grammar of the last of these commercials, Malkinson demonstrates the remarkable work it does in condensing the narrative world of *Twin Peaks* into a micro narrative that simultaneously operates as advertising, emphasising the central role played by Angelo Badalamenti's score in this transposition.

Finally Lindsay Hallam's article returns to the more familiar territory of David Lynch's role, or the perception of his role, as television auteur for the series, pointing out both the prevalence of this perception and its problematic nature in the collaborative medium of television, and especially in terms of the Lynch and Frost collaboration that is at the heart of the series. Hallam tests these dominant perceptions via the analysis of a key episode within the show, season two, episode one, one of the six that were directed by David Lynch. This episode, perhaps the weirdest in the entire series other than the finale, certainly seems to strongly bear the mark of David Lynch's authorship, especially in the slow and almost avant-garde opening scenes that are analysed in detail. At the same time Hallam positions the episode in terms of the declining ratings for the show, which eventually led to its cancellation. Yet it was just such departures from narrative expectations that sustained the series' critical and fan engagement, and ultimately proved highly influential on contemporary complex television drama, a legacy that Hallam outlines

at the conclusion of her article.

With this article we therefore return to the question of the relationship between *Twin Peaks* and the contemporary, transformed television landscape. This is both in terms of its persistent influence and legacy, acknowledged by television producers and scholars alike, and its incipient return after more than 25 years. While we can only speculate how this return will play out, we can be sure that the producers of season three will take advantage of the aesthetic turn that the show's earlier seasons helped to initiate. As Agent Cooper says in the pilot for the opening season "what goes around comes around", and this piece of folk wisdom certainly seems applicable to the show's highly anticipated return.

The editors would like to thank all the contributors to this dossier, as well as the peer reviewers who also made invaluable contributions to the quality of the articles. We would also like to thank Daniel Fairfax at Senses of Cinema, *whose support and facilitation of the publication process was exceptional and highly appreciated.*

– Kirsty Fairclough, Michael N. Goddard, and Anthony N. Smith

Endnotes